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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses questions about the processes involved when viewers "make sense" out of the diverse visual and aural signs of a television program and then render that sense in a spoken account. A pilot study was conducted to explore the manner in which modes of viewing, and talk about viewing, include or exclude recognition of non-fiction television as motivated discourse despite its conventions of naturalistic representation. Sixteen Liverpool respondents representing a mix of gender, class, and occupation, were individually interviewed in one-to-one sessions of about an hour's duration immediately after he/she had watched a British Broadcasting Company (BBC) 2 documentary about life on the dole in their city. Responses were categorized as transparent, mediated, displaced, or manipulative. The contributions of one particular participant/speaker are used to illustrate the findings of this preliminary research because of the important classic structural, stylistic, and thematic features that appeared in his responses. Reactions of other participants to this individual are then described in terms of the connections they make between their attitudes toward him, their understanding of the program, and his function in their reactions to the program. It is concluded that, in exploring the social character of media reception, a much more extensive literature of documentation and attempted analysis will be required. (17 references) (CGD)

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READING RECEPTION: MEDIATION AND TRANSPARENCY IN VIEWERS' ACCOUNTS OF A TV PROGRAMME

by

Kay Richardson & John Corner (University of Liverpool)

February, 1986.

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Reading Reception: Mediation and Transparency in Viewers' Accounts of a TV Programme.

Kay Richardson & John Corner (University of Liverpool).

This article is an attempt to address questions about the processes involved when viewers 'make sense' out of the diverse visual and aural signs of a TV programme and then render that sense in a spoken account. In particular, we want to explore the manner in which modes of viewing, and talk about viewing, include or exclude recognition of non-fiction T.V. as motivated discourse despite its conventions of naturalistic representation.

We take as our specific recorded and transcribed data the interpretative accounts of a small number of Liverpool respondents who we invited to watch a BBC2 documentary programme ('A Fair Day's Fiddle') about 'fiddling' by the unemployed on a Liverpool estate, originally screened on March 13th 1984. However, the general framing of our analysis and its guiding ideas owe a great deal to recent research and argument about how audiences interpret media output. A heightening of interest in this area, stimulated by currents of cross-disciplinary influence - most notably from developments in cultural studies and from linguistics, literary theory and micro-sociology - has produced a usefully inter-related if small body of notions and findings regarding the nature of media reception (see for instance Brunt & Jordin 1984, Corner 1984, Dahlgren 1984, Eco 1972, McHoul 1982, Morley 1980, Pateman 1983, Suleiman & Crosman 1980, Wren-Lewis 1983 & 1984). Much of this work, like our own, asks not only 'what does this mean?' in respect of particular readers or viewers but also 'how does it come to mean this?', a question leading the inquiry into an ethnographic consideration of specific interpretative resources, competencies and activities.

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And since the design of our own project was in large part informed by our sense of what in previous studies could be built on and what needed to be re-thought, it might be useful here to consider briefly some aspects of media reception studies as we presently judge them to have developed.

Most recent inquiry in this area, whatever its discipline basis, has registered as a key point of departure for its arguments a dissatisfaction with those approaches to the study of communicational and cultural processes in which textual forms receive exclusive attention. The assumption, which text-centered studies have tended to encourage, that meanings somehow exist as inherent properties of textual signification and are thus available there for identification and plotting, provided that a sufficiently powerful or sensitive 'reading' can be brought to bear on them, is rejected. Along with it is rejected the idea that such a 'reading' could ever provide an adequate base for pronouncements about the character and strength of audience response or of probable 'ideological effects'. In its place, there is an attempt to take seriously, and to carry through into empirical investigation, the idea that meaning is the product of particular interpretative conventions (variously commonplace or esoteric) being applied to textual imagery and language, so that any study interested in the functions or uses of public communications output must try to take both these conventions and their modes of application into account.

In this way, the intensively textual and semantic perspective on media research promoted, for instance, by some varieties of semiotics, is replaced by a perspective closer to that of linguistic pragmatics. Through this, detailed study of textual form is undertaken within the terms of a broader investigation into the contingencies of text-reader relations and the very elements and practices constitutive of reading, hearing or viewing.

Given this shift of emphasis, however, questions of theory are quickly joined by related questions of method - for what kind of data might be obtained about what has frequently been seen as the 'black box' realm of audience perceptual and cognitive processings? And what kind of scheme of hypothesis and inquiry could be used to ask questions of this data?

Here it is perhaps important to note how most of the discussion to which we refer has differed from a long-established and continuing strand of audience research in media sociology (see, for instance, McQuail 1983 for an overview of this.) For whereas in this latter area questions of significance-for-audience are often addressed in a very general way, without any close interest in the operation of particular significatory elements or phases (and sometimes without relation to any particular programme or even genre), the newer research makes the relationships between localised signifying elements and interpreted meanings a primary focus for exploration.

Certainly, the most influential single project in tracing signification-interpretation relationships remains David Morley's study of the responses of various groups of viewers to taped editions of the early evening BBC news magazine Nationwide (Morley 1980). This much-discussed study was an attempt to develop an ethnography of 'decoding' which could chart differentiations in interpretative activity and, more ambitiously, could correlate these with the larger economic, social and cultural categories from which the groups (largely internally homogeneous in these respects) were drawn.

Morley's work has attracted a fair amount of both theoretical and methodological argument (see, for example, Corner 1983 and

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Wren-Lewis 1983) with perhaps some of the most trenchant criticisms coming from Morley himself in a post-script article (Morley 1981). We shall refer to selected aspects of these arguments later, but for our present purposes, the two most pertinent problems which the 1980 study posed for future initiatives seemed to us to be:

i. The need to get as near as possible to the actual (in a sense, 'lowest level') business of audience meaning-making from what is shown, said or printed. Without this connection (retrospectively rendered in respondents accounts) between specific items and viewer understandings there is a danger that the analyst's questioning of respondents will 'cream off' general responses and attitudes without generating much indication as to how, or at what point, these were formed and developed through the viewing experience. What in the way of more specific references do emerge are likely to be weighted towards the more directly propositional elements of the programme's verbal discourses and therefore to 'mask' the significatory work of the visual track.

ii. The need to give sustained attention to the features and details of respondents' talk as they develop their interpretative accounts within the overall setting of interview/discussion. Here, the relative strengths of group and of one-to-one settings is a matter for consideration. Our view is that, whilst both situations are clearly 'artifical' in a way that always has to be remembered when using the talk as data, there are special difficulties with group work which suggest that research of this kind should involve a substantial element of one-to-one discussion,

particularly in the early stages. These difficulties include problems of speaker identification; the variables of domination, inhibition and consensus introduced by group dynamics (and frequently productive of 'fragmentary' types of utterance whose subsequent use by the analyst as independent and complete statements would be most questionable) and also the quite severe limitations on the opportunities for using 'follow-up' questioning to elicit supplementary or clarificatory comment. Against these factors though, there does have to be set the advantage of facilitating a form of talk which at times will probably be openly argumentative, questioning and supportive (as being between declared 'non experts') and which may thereby promote and clearly indicate changes in respondents' interpretations and attitudes in the course of the discussion.

It was with these two related problems centrally in mind that we designed our own 'pilot' inquiry into interpretative activity.

Reception ethnography and respondent language

In the context of work on TV audiences, ethnography has been undertaken primarily with the aim of tracing connections between the social positions of viewers and their interpretations - accepting that 'social position in no way directly correlates with decodings' (Morley 1980 p. 137) and therefore that one of the tasks of research is to discover precisely what links do exist. Our own present research is concerned with what we regard as the preliminary project of discovering more about the general character of interpretation itself and the manner in which social knowledge is used to resource it.

Since we were not aiming to develop a sociological argument in this pilot study, sampling was not an issue, although we chose respondents who were not too socially/culturally homogeneous (a mix of gender, class and occupation) expecting (correctly) that their accounts of the programme would be significantly different. We explored this differentiation by paying close attention to the language used in the interviews that followed each respondent's viewing of the programme. This involved concentrating upon the different 'framings' that respondents gave to their accounts; their perception of various programme items as a mediation and/or as a transparent representation of people, settings and circumstances. We chose the BBC documentary because its formal characteristics (discussed later) offered the possibility of tracking interpretations in relation to a number of different visual and verbal devices. It also seemed likely that its subject-matter might be such as to provoke quite a high level of engagement and a subsequent richness of initial account in our respondents (again, given our specific aims, we did not see such a choice as compromising the research design).

The interviews were one-to-one sessions of about an hour's duration conducted immediately after each viewing. We chose this method because of our interest in the specific details of the interpretative process, and our sequencing and manner of questioning often varied from one interview to the next in our attempt to avoid the kinds of answers that are elicited in questionnaire-based audience research. We wished to explore the subtleties of viewer understandings even if this had to be at the expense of direct comparability between the different accounts. What we were confronting in the readings were examples of a particular form of discourse - the discourse of interpretation.

An interview with a respondent about a television programme that he or she has been asked to watch under unusual circumstances results in discourse that is very complex in its weaving-together of auto-biography, political and social beliefs, affective responses, description of programme content and speculation about the processes of production, to name only the most prominent themes. The research involves the selective reading of these recordings, treating them as evidence of how the respondents made sense of the programme, what they understood themselves to be seeing and hearing as the viewing experience progressed. Yet it would be a mistake to approach the recordings with the attitude that interpretations can be recognised and pulled out of their discursive context without an understanding of the fabric of that context. In the first place there is the problem of recognition itself. When, for example a respondent comments in terms of his or her own attitude to 'fiddling' it will not always be obvious whether this is being set alongside a perception of the programme's attitude to that topic, as either 'like' or 'unlike'. And in the second place, there is a risk of drawing the line between, on the one hand the interpretation (regarded as the principal data) and on the other its discursive context at the wrong point.

This is a risk, for example, with the following comments (hypothetical examples, but except for 2, based on the data)

1. The guy with the beard was a clever bloke.
2. They presented the guy with the beard as a clever bloke.
3. The guy with the beard came across as a clever bloke.

At one level these comments offer the same interpretation: that one of the contributors to the programme could be perceived as 'clever'. But the syntax suggests differences of interpretation that should be taken seriously. The first version is, in our terms, an evaluative transparency reading. It comments on the character of 'the guy with the beard' as if he had been directly perceived by the respondent, rather than perceived through the mediation of editing and form of presentation. The second version by contrast is a thorough-going mediation reading, with a problematic exophoric pronoun as the source for the perception of cleverness that results, a perception in which 'the guy with the beard' himself is merely the carrier of a meaning that has a quite different point of origin. The third version involves a 'hedge'. 'They' are no longer the explicit source of the perception, but neither is 'he' necessarily. Either explanation of the perception is possible under this formulation.

Differences of this kind are at least as relevant to the study of interpretative variation as the points of similarity. Too commonsensical a view of what constitutes an 'interpretation' would miss the point entirely in missing the way that the attribution of 'cleverness' is framed. Hence the framing is not an ignorable part of 'the context' of the respondents' interpretations (a matter, merely, of 'how they said it' and not of 'what was said') but is itself part of the interpretation.

In the following discussion of the respondents' uptake on specific aspects of the programme, we have made use of a provisional reading typology, differentiating between 'transparency reading' and 'mediation reading' as a first step. It is important to note that we use these terms primarily to characterise the tendency of specific utterances within an interpretative account rather than to classify whole accounts as being either of one sort or the other. We also became aware that either type of reading could be displaced (i.e. hypothesised by the respondent as what 'someone else' might say about the programme, ranging from ' my mother' to 'people from Basingstoke' - in the latter case a displacement in which class consciousness may have had a part to play); that readings could be offered as 'givens' about the programme's meanings or as the result of inferences on the viewer's part and that readings could involve the recognition of a manipulative intent on the part of the programme makers.

Many of the details of this rudimentary typology have yet to be worked through but it is clear that the categories are likely to combine and intersect with one another 'on the ground' in ways that make it unrealistic to expect any tight, formal set of distinctions to emerge. Also, in the course of watching programmes and talking about them viewers may re-frame as mediated what earlier, perhaps due to their immediacy of response to the people and issues depicted, they treated transparently. Nevertheless, as a broad guide to important features of respondents' interpretations the categories have proved useful. For the purposes of an initial classification of the kinds of status, forms of address and intentionality attributed to news and documentary material by viewer/respondents, such a scheme is an

alternative to those based more directly on assessing the level of agreement/disagreement with a programme's propositional content. Morley's enterprising employment of the three 'ideal type' reading positions proposed by Parkin (1971), dominant, negotiated and oppositional in relation to the point of view 'preferred' in the text - is undoubtedly the most well-known and widely-referred to scheme of this latter kind, though Morley's valuable comments on its limitations seem to have received less attention (Morley 1981). Parkin's categories are troublesome to use, as Morley discusses, partly because they are insufficiently discriminating (e.g. as between different forms of 'oppositional' reading - so different in fact that putting them together under this heading is an intuitively unsound generalisation) and partly because the status of the 'preferred' reading is itself ambivalent, and can barely be understood in a way that is consistent with the idea that decodings other than those at least encompassing the preferred one can be equally legitimately derived from the same text.

However, Parkin's scheme was adopted to enable audience research to give attention to questions of ideological reproduction, conceived in terms of the degrees of hegemonic dominance exercised over public knowledge by media accounts. As we shall suggest later, in any more extensive reception survey following on from this pilot study the terms we have devised would need to be related to some equivalent set of concepts in order that similar questions of social cognition and power could be addressed.

Our interest in the 'discourse of interpretation' is thus somewhat different from the concern that Wren-Lewis (1983) expresses about the appropriation of respondents' accounts in ethnographic research. Wren-Lewis is concerned that respondents' accounts are too often measured against meanings already 'discovered' in the material by the research - for example, the 'preferred readings' found in the various items of Nationwide (Brunsdon and Morley 1978; Morley 1980). This approach, argues Wren-Lewis, risks imposing a spurious structure upon the range of responses offered by respondents, and neglects the possibility of finding alternative coherent structures of a parallel kind in respondents' own accounts. It amounts to a refusal to explore each account of the programme on its own terms. The researchers' terms are imposed upon all of the data.

Whilst recognising these dangers, for our purposes we were not happy with the degree of relativism suggested by Wren-Lewis's approach. We had some specific, though tentative, hypotheses about aspects of the programme's meaning and organisation. We sought to explore these hypotheses by investigating the extent to which, and the terms upon which, those aspects featured in respondents' accounts. Rather than imposing our own interpretation upon those of the respondents, so that the complexity of the latter became invisible or inacessible to us, we were obliged to come to terms with the complexity of respondents' accounts if we were to discover anything interesting about the interpretative consequences of those programme features that we had tentatively identified as significant.

The most interesting sections of the interviews we obtained are those in which the framing of the interpretation is important in relation to the substantive issues that the programme deals with, as in the following extract (edited transcript):

> I think the programme or the makers focussed on that area so that people, the ordinary person watching the programme, you know, the first thing that would spring to their mind would be 'Well, if they're living like that, you know, how can they afford that if they're on the dole or even if they've got a job on the side'. And I think that they were pandering to that prejudice that the ordinary person (....) the man or the woman in the street would have that. I'm thinking of people, say, my mother for example would say something like that, she often does say things like that.

This description overall takes the form of what we would call a manipulative, displaced reading. The implication of the quote is that the respondent's mother, as an 'ordinary person' (the respondent does not identify himself as an ordinary person) is already predisposed to believe that the unemployed are doing rather well on social security and hence that she would perceive - as the programme intends that she should - things such as the amount of drinking and smoking that goes on, and that the homes shown in the programme are well-furnished by her standards. She would take these facts as evidence that her belief about life on the dole was justified. But she would not perceive that she is intended to draw this conclusion. The respondent, recognising the intention, is not manipulated by it. But his mother doesn't recognise the intention and is therefore manipulated.

In this case a displaced reading allows the respondent to hold in place a reading of the programme that he makes but has reason to objectify as part of his own more complex reading.

The Programme

The 50 minute programme used in this study, 'A Fair Day's Fiddle', was a BBC production for the documentary series Brass Tacks. This series, made at the Manchester TV centre and screened on BBC2 has a particular interest in issues affecting the North-West. The episode examined was shot in Netherley, Liverpool, and is broadly concerned with life on the dole in this area, with especial reference to 'fiddling' which in this context means for example: stripping materials from derelict buildings, tampering with electricity meters and working on the side. The programme also deals with the question of debt in these circumstances and what to do about it.

The programme concentrates upon subjects' own accounts of their circumstances, their activities, their motives and their rationalisations. The reporter's voice is almost totally absent from the programme and no reporter ever appears in shot. The reporter who introduces the programme says, inter alia, "local people speak for themselves." Officially, then, it is the intention of the programme not to make moral judgements on behaviour that, nevertheless, will undoubtedly be referred to ethical standards when viewed by the television audience. This official forbearance is reinforced by the episodic (rather than rhetorical) shape of the programme, suggesting 'sampling' - of different problems, to which 'fiddles' are an answer; of different opinions about 'fiddling' generally, all from within the area; of different 'fiddles'. The progress of the film is broken on two occasions by 'musical interludes' when the visual material (shots of the Netherley area, its streets and its housing) is accompanied by music (slow, synthesised rock) rather than talk.

Stylistically, different episodes and sections of episodes are presented in varying forms (a useful account of some of these forms are contained in Heath & Skirrow, 1977). Sometimes subjects speak 'on camera'. Eyelines suggest an out-of-frame reporter, but since the reporter is generally neither seen nor heard by viewers, the result is an impression of 'unsolicited testimony' - talk volunteered without prompting. In some cases the content of the talk thus delivered is very personal. One woman describes how she was told that since she was not paying for her seven year old child's funeral she would have to sit in the funeral car with the coffin on her lap. The combination of personal subject matter and delivery without (apparent) reportorial intervention gives a spurious directness to the relationship between the on-screen subject and the viewer. In some cases, reporters are present at events involving pairs and groups of local people. In such cases filming shows them 'talking amongst themselves' as well as addressing the out-of-frame reporter. The unsolicited testimony effect is not so great in these sequences. Another presentational form is that of dramatic episodes enacted by the subjects themselves (but undoubtedly acted: this is not conventional verité footage although at points the programme uses a verité style). We address ourselves more directly to this aspect of the programme, which raises questions about credibility and authenticity, in a further, forthcoming paper on our research (Corner & Richardson 1986). Finally, the programme uses various contributors for voice-over sequences. Sometimes they voice over footage of themselves; sometimes over footage which is thematically related to what they are saying. In both cases much of the accompanying visual action can be seen as 'enacted', if not always to the same degree or in the same manner as the footage in the dramatic episodes.

Notwithstanding the emphasis that the programme places upon the views of Netherley people themselves, and the interpretative openness of a programme that eschews reportorial framing of the subjects, there is arguably a subtext to the programme that owes more to the operations of the programme makers than to the Netherley people. The subtext concerns the standard of living that can be supported on the dole. It seems to us that the programme is organised and works to encourage a perception of fiddling on the dole as efforts made to maintain a good or reasonable standard of living - as against encouraging the perception that it is only fiddling which allows the unemployed to survive. Several factors can be adduced in support of this interpretation. Picking up on an earlier comment by a contributor, a reporter is heard at one point to ask him if he is saying that local fiddling is because people want to live rather than exist. The contributor assents to this proposition. On the visual side there are things that we may or may not be meant to notice, like the fact that a lot of cigarette smoking is going on in this community, that going out for a drink is a normal part of (male) life on the estate, that the homes from which people speak their minds to camera seem well furnished and decorated. At one point, two mothers talk about buying toys for their children, mentioning prices up to two hundred pounds.

Respondent interpretations: Speaker Three

In this article, rather than selecting 'sample' material from across the very wide spread of comment which we collected on the various themes, sequences and features of the programme, we have chosen to focus on the responses we got to the contribution of one participant/ speaker who appears on a number of occasions. Since this person's contributions were regarded by both ourselves and the majority of our respondents as a major feature of the documentary, we feel that this restriction of focus (representing no more than half an hour of recordings out of the thirteen hours collected) is justifiable in that the specific interpretations and assessments made here are quite central to the respondents' general sense of what the programme was about and how it worked.

The thematic continuities gained by restricting the citation of data in this way also allows us to point up economically those relationships between elements of interpretative discourse and respondent cognitions and framings which we are suggesting that an ethnography of reception needs to take into account.

Speaker Three is the third person to be heard on the sound-track, excluding the reporter who introduces the programme. His importance within the documentary is constituted by several features which we can classify conveniently as structural, stylistic and thematic.

Structurally, the principal feature is the way in which both Speaker Three's presence and his verbal contributions serve partly as a kind of link across a number of different scenes and phases within the programme. In one instance this involves the use of a short sequence of generalised reflection by him (with face in shot) to follow and 'gloss' an enactment and interview scene in which particularised, biographical comment has been given.

The relevant stylistic features are both visual and verbal. Visually, a distinctive characteristic is the use of generously-timed 'display' shots, establishing his presence quite strongly and inviting the viewer to give a measure of steady attention to his appearance, behaviour and immediate environment (e.g. in rolling a cigarette, buying tobacco from a mobile shop, entering his house and eventually watching T.V. from his sofa). Gaps in his voice-over or in-shot speech during these sequences mean that only location-sound is heard. During one of these sequences, the one which is shot in his room, considerable use is made of extreme close-up and shifting camera angles.

Verbally,it is very noticeable to us and to respondents that, in contrast with that of every other participant, his style of speech is very measured and carefully paced, having something of the rhythm of public speaking. Such an impression is further reinforced by the rhetorical organisation of his comments. This makes effective use of parallelisms, as can be observed in an example from his opening voice-over:

> 'Our fiddles have been forced on us
> Our fiddles are not done for gain or for profits
> Our fiddles are done because it's necessary
> it's necessary for us to exist'.

Finally, and following on from this, in its themes the speech of Speaker Three differs from that of other participants insofar as it consists in good part of general social propositions rather than of particularistic, experiential ones. No-one else says things like 'There are four classes in Great Britain...' or 'Jobs are a thing of the past...'.

It is clear that all three above groupings of features will be inter-related and perhaps mutually supportive in their consequences for any interpretative 'uptake' on Speaker Three. Below, we have organised comments so as to allow a relative emphasis upon, respectively, the visual, the verbal and then the explicitly evaluative dimensions of the responses that were made to us. Most hesitations and repetitions have been removed from these extracts and conventional punctuation is used as a guide for readers; the texts thus represent considered interpretations of the spoken material and do not provide access to characteristics of the data as speech. (?) is used for indistinct passages and (...) marks editorial ellipsis rather than incompletion on the speaker's part.

Section I: Reading visual presentation and setting

1. I think it follows him back into the house and all the time I was aware of the sort of staging of things, you know, when he goes to the van in the first place there's obviously a camera you know behind the shop assistant and he's made this comment you know, for the benefit of the camera, and the camera follows him back to the house. And this was a technique that I think that was used quite a lot, you saw the individual and then you saw them in the context of their own house, and from what they'd been saying you suddenly, you follow them into the house and they're talking about squalour and deprivation and poverty and having no money, and then suddenly you see a beautiful three piece suite, you know, colour T.V. in the corner, video underneath, all kinds of you know, nicely kept pot plants and you think to yourself you know, this isn't squalour. But you're led into that argument by the camera you know, this kind of incongruity between what's being said and how they're actually living came up time and time again from the, you know. Presumably it was intended you know to raise questions in the viewer's mind as to you know, "why?" - which is I think a criticism that I would make because I think in that sense it was unsympathetic to the people it was filming.

2. Yeah, the man who, he was on his own, always on his own, he'd never got a wife with him. I don't know whether he lived on his own. He was always on his own, and they showed him sort of outside with the flats behind him, rolling his own cigarette and looking very bleak, and things like that.

3. I suppose everyone felt what he said anyway because of the situation they were all in it was just that he was in the position where he wasn't going to shy away from the camera he was going to say it wasn't he you know.. so he was the type of character who would push himself forward to say it that's why I remember him you know.

(...)

I thought it was a bit of a mess-up really I mean he was saying things, he was saying he couldn't afford anything but you looked at his house you know.

Q Well, let's turn away from what he said to what he looked like and how he appeared on the programme, can you remember much about that?

Well, he looked like a thug.

Q Did he?

Yes don't you think so? I thought he did. Like as I say he's one of those I wouldn't want to have an argument with you know. He came over as a heavy character didn't he?

4. He's in an armchair, he's relaxed. He doesn't feel pressured. Mind you there's nothing for him to feel pressured about because he doesn't insinuate that he is doing anything fraudulent or illegal to any extent that you might pick up on that. He's not boasting, he's griping. I didn't like his interview at all. I don't agree with anything that he says for a start so my impression of him would be one-sided.

Q What, his own comments one-sided?

My comments on what he said would be one-sided so it would turn me away from giving a clear view of what I saw of him.

5. But he looked, to me, him and his family looked quite well off you know. Leather jackets don't come cheap do they?

This selection of respondent comments indicates a number of aspects of interpretative accounting in which particular elements of visual depiction are variously registered within 'mediation' and/or 'transparency' framings and variously related to elements of knowledge, assumption and evaluation produced from elsewhere, including from what is being said in the programme.

The degree of overall 'match' which respondents interpret across all the elements perceived as significant may be subsequently rendered either in terms of the coherence, or otherwise of the programme's communicative design or (more transparently) in terms of the personal qualities and credibility of those people appearing and speaking within it.

Items 2 and 4 give readings of the depicted settings for the participant/interviewee's speech. In 2 the respondent's doubts about what can be inferred from what is seen ('I don't know whether he lived on his own..') poses as a possibility a gap between actual circumstances and specific programme depictions. Further comments in 2 - the attribution of agency to the programme makers ('they showed him..') and an indication of the compositional and associational properties of the depiction ('...flats behind him's 'bleak') - also

serve to render the speaker's solitariness as primarily an 'effect' of the programme for this respondent.

In 4, visually-derived information is used more confidently in 'present-tense' recollection to inform judgements about the speaker's state of mind and attitudes. Here, the speaker's behaviour is perceived as occurring, as it were, 'authentically'(and it thus becomes readable back directly to matters of character) rather than being viewed partly as a product of programme conventions. Nevertheless, this respondent also suggests that initial, fundamental disagreement with the speaker's comments has skewed or limited the perception of his appearance and behaviour or, at least, the capacity to give a 'fair' account of that perception.

In some contrast with this reading of the speaker's position as relaxed and unpressured, item 3 develops an account of the conditions of speaking in terms of the forwardness of the speaker in securing his opportunity to contribute. There are some indications that this reading of character-type draws on personal appearance and its suggestiveness ('thug';'a heavy character'). Given this emphasis it would be unusual for such an interpretation to reference any mediating conditions acting upon the depiction, but the respondent is worried by the discrepancy between what is said and the appearance of the speaker's house. Just how far this is finally perceived as a loss of coherence in the programme's organisation or, alternatively, as a matter of speaker dishonesty, is not clear, though 'mess-up' does suggest the former.

A comparable registration of inconsistency occurs both in items 1 and 5. In 5 the comment turns, after approval of what was said, to the noting of potentially discrepant aspects of the visuals - the respondent gives the example of a leather jacket as an indicator of 'well-off' ness. For the respondent, this appears to put a question

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mark against the propriety of the speaker making the comments that he does, if not against their truthfulness.

In 1 as in 3 it is the information provided by 'seeing' the house interior which pulls against interpretation of the speech. However, the respondent in 1, who offers a sustained mediation reading (his reference to 'staging' for instance) of a kind we found only in a very few of our recordings, differs from all the other readers of discrepancy quoted above in regarding the inconsistency not as some form of lapse but as a device routinely employed by the makers of the programme to 'raise questions in the viewer's mind'.

This appears to involve the respondent in producing what we have earlier called a 'manipulative displaced' reading, since although he reports himself as making the intended reading (' and you think to yourself you know....') he also registers the cueing of this activity ('your're led into that argument by the camera'). This recognition presumably neutralises the effectiveness of the device unless, in the phases of perceived incongruity, the programme is understood by him to be explicitly polemical.

Clearly, the relationships between hearing and seeing as they interact to inform the interpretative process need to be 'shadowed' as closely as possible through respondent accounts if understanding of the conditions and the tensions of 'knowing through television' is to be advanced.

Section II: Reading speech.

6. No I think, the way it came over to me was, he really was speaking for everyone. He was sort of putting into words which, simple, straightforward, everyday language which everybody should be able to understand, he was saying it all for the other people in their own little particular moans or grouses or trying to get a message across. And the whole thing together was, he said it all for them. That's the way it came across.

7. Q. Mm. Do you, he gets more time, just about, perhaps, than anyone else?

He speaks better.

Q. And you think he speaks better, yeah.

Well, he's using the utmost of his ability to come across clearly and intelligently. Not intellectual, but intelligent social comments.

Q And do you think that's why he gets so much time?

Yes I do because I didn't find him an interesting factor in the film. I found him very boring. I thought he was uncompromising, and I wouldn't like him.

Q. But he's clear.

But he's clear and he's concise and he's got an aim even though it might not be right he's got an aim, he's doing something about it whereas the rest are suffering. He's the only one who is actually doing something about it. In his own way.

8. I think I said that he was more politicised than the others. He talked, the individual families or people that they looked at talked subjectively, you know, about their own plight, but he talked about the problem objectively, he talked about the overall problem, and he talked about it in his own sort of, I don't know, sociological terms or whatever, he had his own sort of views on the system but he talked, as I say, he talked more objectively than others. That's one of the reasons why I've labelled him as the link, the link.

9. The way the actual unemployed chap was treated, he was given a lot of time. I think he must have been given a lot of open questions, which were then slanted because he seemed to be railing against things quite a lot, I mean specific things like advertisements, like the status of the unemployed, like the class system, and I'm not sure really whether he was slightly set up to that. He seemed to be given a lot of time to express his grievances, and I think he must've been prompted in some way to talk about these things, on purpose.

Q. What would the purpose be, though, do you think, if he was given lee-way?

Well presumably, to given an open honest view of how they felt, as unemployed people.

In this section we're focussing on the responses that our interviewees made when asked to think about the way that Speaker Three spoke and his function in the programme. The view was widely shared that he was somehow different from other participants, or treated differently, although the terms in which this 'difference' was characterised varied between respondents, as the above quotations show.

Whereas 6 refers to 'simple, straightforward, everyday language', 8 says that Speaker Three uses sociological terms. Whereas 7 emphasis that he was using his ability to come across clearly and intelligently, 9 thinks that he is not totally in control of his own performance. Whereas 8 finds him 'objective', 9 notices that he is 'railing' and expressing his grievances. Whereas for 6 there is continuity between Speaker Three and the other participants in the programme (and for the rest of the community?), for 7 there is an important discontinuity; 'he's got an aim, he's doing something about it whereas the rest are suffering'. These contrasted beliefs are not necessarily incompatible and must not be taken to represent the limits of any respondents thoughts on this subject. But there is an interest in these contrasts between what respondents choose to mention first, to fore-ground or to emphasise.

Quotes 6 and 7 can be taken as representing, broadly, transparency readings of Speaker Three's contribution to the programme. They take him to be the 'author' of how he comes across: 'he really was speaking for everyone'; 'he's using the utmost of his ability to come across clearly and intelligently' - though 7 moves through qualitatively different phases: a descriptive phase, an 'intentionalist' phase, and phase of judgement, 'very boring' and inference, 'he's got an aim'. The main thrust of 8 is transparent also, and descriptive in its orientation.

However, it ends with a characterisaction that hints at perception of mediation (mediation reading is common for this respondent), in using the term 'link', with its suggestion of structural relations between Speaker Three's contribution and other parts of the programme. But the term is used with equivocation. 7 is explicit that the interpretation is personal. 'I've labelled him the link'. In one sense the entire corpus consists of personal interpretations. But when this feature is foregrounded in relation to any particular comment the result is a contrast between that comment and others not so qualified.

9 is alive to the possibility that Speaker Three is not in all respects the author of his performance, although it uses truncated passives so the controlling agent(s) of the production process is (are) never named, even by generalisation (eg 'the makers'). At the beginning it is as if 9 is saying that those in charge wanted to have someone say these specific things. But when invited to consider why (for example, to show viewers how resentful the unemployed can be) the answer virtually retracts this possibility - 'to give an open honest view of how they felt, as unemployed people'. For under this characterisation the implication is that the openness of the question sought only honesty, and therefore that the programme-makers weren't after any particular content.

Section III: Sympathies and evaluations.

10. I think the film could've been more interesting and still had his point of view come across, if he hadn't been interviewed alone. If they'd had somebody with an opposite point of view. I think if they'd had somebody with an opposite or different approach to his point of view to put his back against the wall where he had to defend his point of view, then that would have held my interest more than him just being given the lead to down-trod everything he thought was against him.

11 (Respondent has been asked if Speaker Three is an important functioning element in the programme).

I think so because you see perhaps that's what helps controversy, the fact that you've got this guy saying those things, and it's making you respond. I mean you're responding basically to him and you're thinking, you know, how annoying. And the whole question of the unemployed and both sides are beginning to come out in your own mind. And it goes from sympathy for the person whose child has died, to him showing the other side, sort of resenting the fact he's unemployed, and it swings both ways. And I think that's important in a documentary otherwise you're having your mind made up for you, if it's, say it had been all sort of pitying images and full of sadness, now that's wrong because that's forcing it really into a corner and making you think, well I should be thinking this about the unemployed.

12. I think he reinforces it more. He sort of, he makes more of a point, you know. He sums it up well I think, each thing he says, yeah. He's got it summed up properly. 'Cos I can'relate to things he says, see. I can relate all of what he says, so I'm agreeing. I'm sort of you know noticing him more because he's the way I feel about a lot of things like, he's sort of similar opinions.

13. He came across as a very strongminded person, I think. I don't think that would have brought so much sympathy. His opinions I think were a bit too strong for perhaps certain members of our society who might be watching the programme because he seemed to be filled with resentment. Now that's not a bad thing to show resentment but I think if you put too much resentment in a programme you're going to alienate certain other sections of the society who'd be watching a BBC programme.

14. Well he obviously had some grasp of what was going on, you know, the situation. Which a lot of people tend to do, you know, often people have more grasp of what's going on than people give them credit for, specially in documentaries.

15. (Respondent has been asked whether she can identify with Speaker Three or not: 'the other one' is another of the programme's prominent participants already mentioned by this respondent).

Well, no I would be behind the other one. Do you know what I mean? I'd put, I would think, he's generalising about the whole thing but he does seem resigned to the fact and he can sit there and he can say that there are jobs 'cos he said, you know, "These people that say there are jobs if they go out and look for them, well there aren't." But I mean if he's a painter and decorator, well there are jobs, 'cos people are always painting and decorating aren't they?

Q. Yes

and if he went out and looked for them. But he seems to say 'well there's so many classes and I'm the bottom class because I'm on the dole' and that's it, and he does seem to. It wouldn't build up your sympathy for him I don't think. I mean, I couldn't speak for anybody else, but (?).

16. It seems to me from what you're saying about him that you almost see him as providing the sort of material that a reporter could have provided or doing the job that a reporter could have done about generalisation or some kind of explanation. Is that right?

No. I think people who would be critical of the documentary would see him in that role. But I mean I just saw him as one of the people of Netherley. I think that he was used in that way merely from the director's or producer's, people who made the thing if they're going to not have any reporter talking over, you know, I think you've got to use somebody, you know from an idea of producing and putting a package together you've got to have some kind of link in it.

17. (Respondent has been asked if Speaker Three's linking contribution to the programme is effective).

In terms of a television programme it's probably necessary. If he hadn't done it, you see, if he hadn't done it presumably the commentator would have been doing it, or would've been directing questions to the other people to try and bring this sort of thing out. Presumably, I don't make television programmes, I don't know. But otherwise the whole thing might have fallen down without him, you know, the sympathetic approach,might well have fallen down, you know.

18. He just, he was like a focus for me, on the thing, he drew the whole thing together it generalised you know, it wasn't. Although he was personally affected by it all he could see through that, he could see what the whole system was doing and what his role was.

Q. You think then that more than other people he was offering generalisations?

Yeah, I think so. Yes, well perhaps the girls from the CAB also summed it up as well. But I think the rest of them were sort of case, individual cases, each sort of having different problems and their own different ways of coping with it.

In this section we've picked quotations where respondents talk about attitudes to Speaker Three - their own and others' - with especial but not exclusive reference to his opinions. We're particularly interested in the connections which respondents make between their attitudes to Speaker Three and their understanding of the programme and his function within it.

The differences between respondents are again of interest. There are respondents who align with Speaker Three in their different ways, such as 12 and 14, and those who don't like 10, 11/13 (the same respondent) and 15. There are comments in which affiliation/nonaffiliation is based upon similarity or difference of opinion, such as 12, 'I can relate to all of what he says so I'm agreeing', and comments where (dis)affiliation is related to the attitude that Speaker Three conveys, such as 11 in which his 'resentment' is found 'annoying' or 15 which is unsympathetic to Speaker Three because he seems resigned. In the case of 15 it is interesting that nonaffiliation here also involves a difference of opinion about the possibility of finding work. There are respondents who consciously register their alignment position as a personal one, as 12 does, and those who generalise it, as does 13 and as 17 seems to do in referring to 'the sympathetic approach' and Speaker Three's contribution to it. For another quotation which explicitly refers to possible effects upon interpretation of the respondents' alignment position, see no. 4 above. In the case of 4 it is respondent non alignment which is held to be significant in principle, whereas in 12 it is respondent alignment. Notice also that the generalised alignment positions articulated in 13 and 17 are attributed to the design of the programme. It is not by accident, then, that Speaker Three is found to be sympathetic by 17 and unsympathetic by 13.

There is a contrast between 12 and 14 although both support Speaker Three's ideas. The difference concerns the degree of separation that each makes between his assessment of those ideas as correct and his perception of them as opinions. It should be said that no respondent takes Speaker Three's propositions about society simply as truths. They do take participants' biographical information as truths, and it is possible that the social propositions could have been taken as (programme-intended) truths had they been spoken by a conventional television presenter, a true narrator or link-man, instead of by a man who is undisguisedly a member of the community with which the programme is concerned (cf. nc. 16, discussed below). The phrasing in 14, 'some grasp of what was going on' suggests independent knowledge of the same thing-that-was-going-on as is referred to by Speaker Three. There is a similar feature in 18 in the references to 'what the whole system was doing and what his role was'. In 12 the quotation begins in such a way as to suggest this kind of alignment; 'he sums it up well I think'. Possibly this 'it' is the same for the respondent as it is for Speaker Three. However by the end of the quotation there has been a shift. In saying explicitly that Speaker Three has 'similar opinions' to his own 12 effects more of a separation between those opinions and his own evaluation of them. It becomes a case of saying that those opinions are like his own rather than a case of saying/implying that they are true, although this respondent has elsewhere taken that approach as well.

The interest of 11 lies in the use that it makes of the respondent's reaction to Speaker Three as 'annoying' in articulating an interpretation of the programme. In the first place that reaction is generalised, it is not offered as purely personal.

Having generalised it the respondent is in a position to see that reaction as something which the programme-makers have worked for, with a particular programme-form in mind, 'it goes from sympathy for the person whose child has died, to him showing the other side of, sort of resenting the fact he's unemployed, and it swings both ways'. 13 is spoken by the same respondent, a few moments earlier in the interview. She appears to have shifted from a displaced reading in which it is other people, not herself, who are going to be alienated when they hear Speaker Three's strong opinions (of discussion below of Speaker Three as a provider of provocative ideas), to a reading which she herself subscribes to. Also, whilst in 13 the displayed resentment and the consequent reaction ('alienation') seem to be characterised almost as a mistake on the part of the programme, in 11 the same resentment and the reaction of annoyance have become design features. This indicates the necessity of not taking any single thing that a respondent might say as independently definitive and final and of focussing upon shifts and inconsistencies within each of the accounts.

10 is of interest because of its objection to the dominance of Speaker Three (and thus of his views) within the programme. This is expressed in terms of a personal judgement of the programme as less interesting because of his dominance. However it is perhaps significant that the ideas he expresses are ones that 10 objects to, and it is possible that behind this formulation lies an anxiety about the programme being unbalanced in its present form (note the phrasing, 'being given the lead to down-trod everything'). Her suggestion for its improvement, the provision of actual debate between Sepaker Three and someone who opposes his views, sounds like a request for a more conventional, perhaps studio-based, documentary

discussion programme. It is useful to examine 16 in relation to this possibility. In 16 the question posed (after the respondent has already described Speaker Three as offering generalisations and used the term 'the link' - See 8 above) invites the respondent to assent to the idea that Speaker Three is a substitute for a conventional presenter. This idea is explicitly rejected despite earlier comments along these lines, echoed again here: 'he was used in that way'. After rejecting this proposition 16 continues: 'I think people who would be critical of the documentary would see him in that role'. This displaced reading could almost be a characterisation of the kind of interpretation we have suggested for 10 above, where there <u>is</u> a criticism of the programme and it <u>is</u> related to the centrality/ dominance of Speaker Three. 16 is anticipating that some people will think that Speaker Three is speaking 'for the programme' and will therefore be critical of the programme because his ideas are so obviously provocative in their content. If on the other hand, Speaker Three is just 'one of the people of Netherley' his controversiality is less of a problem since the ideas of participants in documentary programmes are allowed to be controversial.

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Concluding comments: respondent accounts and reception surveys.

At a general level, our preliminary work on the reception and accounting activities of a small sample audience has confirmed the arguments of earlier studies regarding the variety of meanings and motives which programme material is perceived to have as a result of viewers construing it within different interpretative schemes. It is also clear that an important element of these schemes is personal experience, which may be strong enough to cause an immediate questioning of a programme's depicted realities.

However, our primary conclusions, in line with our investigative aims, concern the character of interpretative processing itself, and the kind of methodology most suited to researching it further. Here, we have focussed on a number of variables to do with the sorts of stance and relationship adopted by viewers towards what is seen and heard, with the interpretation of specific and aural information and with the interaction between screened representations and what viewers previously knew, assumed or believed. Our use of the categories transparent, mediated, displaced and manipulation has served as a basic grid within which they can be plotted.

We believe that the methods which we have followed and the ideas which we have started to develop here will prove of value when applied in the context of larger-scale studies with viewer respondents selected from within a more precisely designed scheme of sampling.

Ideally, such an application would include both one-to-one and group discussion sessions. We have already made out a case for the former but we are aware of the highly unnatural intensity of such speech settings and would seek to advance our inquiry by also using pre-constituted groups (e.g., political, educational, in the workplace) and groups assembled through our own invitatition. One of the objectives here would be to consider more closely than in one-to-one sessions the ways in which differing interpretations are negotiated and contested by viewers through their use both of textual and extra-textual evidence. In this respect, we broadly agree with Morley's comments

(Morley, 1980) on the extent to which everyday interpretations of media material are 'collectively constructed' through social interaction, though we believe that it is impossible to replicate the conditions for such a phased process within any discussion group setting. Moreover, the interpretations given in one-to-one sessions are not to be regarded as somehow 'desocialised' simply as a result of their being 'first accounts' expressed with only the researcher present. For it seems clear to us that when respondents talk about programme material they do so by drawing upon the framings, categories and attitudes formed by their routine participation in talk about television. It is doubtless the case that, in actual settings, first readings and accounts are then often subject to lengthy and complex processes of revision - via talk with others and exposure to further texts for instance - but this does not remove at all from the social significance of those initial framings and understandings which research of the kind proposed seeks to tap. '.

A further sociological dimension of this kind of reception survey would involve not only the offering of 'thicker' descriptions of media uptake but also an attempt to trace correlations across a number of factors bearing on the function of television as a source of popular knowledge and of public definitions. These factors include; substantive topic; television form and language; viewers' readings; interpretative resources employed in producing these readings; socio-demographic data concerning the viewers sampled. As previous work in this area makes clear, it would be a mistake to expect a neat fit between any two factors in isolation and therefore material would need to be examined by reference to a number of hypothetical grids and categories. At the moment, with so little empirical work yet done in this area, too high a degree of methodological anxiety might be both inhibiting and naively premature. In exploring the social character of media

reception, a much more extensive literature of documentation and attempted analysis is the pressing requirement.

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